

Abstract 266

TITLE: School Connectedness and Youth Development Programs as Protective Factors against HIV Infection

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ISSUE: The Add Health research team examined many aspects of the school environment, but found that just one-- a feeling of connection to school-- was associated consistently with better health and healthier behaviors among students. What seems paramount for adolescent health is that schools foster an atmosphere in which students feel that they are treated fairly, close to others, and a part of the school.

SETTING: School programs that are designed to be more than curricular interventions, policy implementation, and/or staff development.

PROJECT: This session will review the potential of youth development programs to augment school connectedness. Youth development outcomes focus on connection-- a sense of safety and structure, a sense of closeness and relationships, a sense of belonging and group membership; confidence-- a sense of self-worth and ability to contribute, a sense of independence and control over one's life; and character-- a sense of competence and mastery of self awareness.

RESULTS: A recently published study in the American Journal of Public Health found that a sex education curricula, which was implemented in an urban middle school composed of minority students, had increased effectiveness when coupled with community service. Students who actively participated in community service showed less sexual activity at six months and scored lower on a sexual activity index compared to a control group. This study corroborated an earlier study by Philliber which found that community service is an effective strategy against unintended teen pregnancy. School personnel working with community partners could take advantage of the emerging research that supports the value of school connectedness, youth development, youth service, and peer education to develop a school-community initiative that promotes a variety of youth-led activities to prevent HIV, other STDs, and unintended pregnancy. Some activities could include: peer education, youth service for people living with HIV/AIDS, cross-age tutoring and mentoring, organizing gay/straight alliances, and others.

LESSONS LEARNED: While the youth development literature has not been organized to identify definitively the most effective programs for fostering protective health factors, evidence is mounting that involving youth in meaningful programs increases the likelihood that they will adopt health enhancing behaviors, particularly if coupled with an effective curricula.

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